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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000780

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STATE FOR DRL, G/TIP, INL, NEA/RA AND NEA/ARPI

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV AE

SUBJECT: UAEG APPROVES COUNTRY'S FIRST FIRST HUMAN RIGHTS NGO

REF: ABU DHABI 373

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR MICHELE J. SISON, REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (U) Summary: On February 18, the Ministry of Social Affairs formally licensed the first human rights organization in the UAE. The new Emirates Human Rights Association (EHRA) will be based in Abu Dhabi, and may have a future branch office in Dubai. All members of the organization passed a security screening, and several have strong UAEG ties. No action has yet been taken regarding two other applications for human rights organizations, both of which have been pending for more than 18 months. Some human rights activists in the country doubt the independence of the EHRA, and question its legitimacy as an independent NGO. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The EHRA will operate under the UAE non-profit organization law. The head of the organization's founding committee, Mohammed Fahd al-Dehim, told PolOff that the goal of the EHRA will be to raise awareness of human rights as provided in the UAE Constitution and the UN Convention on Human Rights. He stated that the organization will work and have close contact with human rights organizations abroad, but that the primary mission of the organization will be to cooperate with the government in making life better for all residents of the UAE. The Gulf News quoted one of the founding members as saying that the role of this local organization will be "important in responding to the foreign reports on human rights practices in the UAE and in offering the real facts".

¶3. (C) The 32 founding members of EHRA, comprised primarily of intellectuals, university professors, and lawyers, will meet next week to elect the board, chairperson and secretary general, all of whom will serve three-year terms. The members were apparently drawn from a list of "acceptable" names from the other two human rights organizations that have applications pending, and supplemented with other people of "good reputation". Two of the EHRA founding members, Dr. Ebtisam Al Kitbi and Dr. Mohammed Obaid Ghobash, political science professors at UAE University, were also the founding members of one of these other organizations. Al-Kitbi told FSN Political Assistant that her group received "directions from higher authorities", that if a third group was formed by joining "certain" members from the first and second groups, and eliminating "unwanted" names labeled as Islamist ideologists, then the third group would get approval to operate. Dr. Ghobash said the same to PolOff, hinting that the directions came from a Cabinet-level contact. In earlier conversations with PolOff, al-Dehim noted that he had been in contact with UAEG officials "since the beginning," and had received assurances from both the Ministries of Interior and

Justice that he will have their full cooperation in monitoring and addressing human rights in the UAE.

¶4. (U) Membership in the EHRA will eventually be open to all UAE nationals above 18 years of age with a clean record, and as non-voting affiliate members -- expatriates &with good reputations.⁸ Although al-Dehim told PolOff that the members were "very independent minded, and (that) this gives us credibility," he admitted that he, himself an MFA official and former UAE ambassador to both Morocco and Italy, will be retiring in order to devote his full time to this new organization. He also noted that some of the other founding members may have to leave the organization due to official appointments in the recent Cabinet change. (Note: One member, Hameed Mohamed al-Qatami, is the new Minister of Health. End note.)

¶5. (C) Mohamed al-Roken, founding member of one of the other unapproved human rights NGOs who is out of favor with the UAEG, stated that five members from his group were asked to join the new organization, but only one accepted--Samira Ghurbash; the others refused because they felt that it lacked independence and therefore legitimacy. Al-Roken stated that the members of his group will wait to see how the new group operates and if it will have an open membership before deciding to join. He doubts that membership will be open to join for some time since the new NGO has six months to elect a permanent Board of Governors from its general membership, and he doubts that membership will open until after the permanent board has been elected. He added that initial discussion within the existing Jurists Association indicates that they will not endorse the new organization until it proves its independence.

¶6. (C) Comment: We suspect that the approval of this organization may preclude any further action on either of the two outstanding human rights organization applications. It

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appears that the UAEG is strongly interested in having a human rights organization in name, but that it is cautious regarding the organization's membership, and the platform that it could provide to radical elements of society to criticize the government. The obvious ties of some of its members to the government, and the fact that all the names were pre-screened by the Ministry, calls the independence of the organization into question. End Comment
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